

women IN SCRIPTure

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The Pharaoh's Daughter: Moses' Adoptive Mother

by Stephanie Catmull

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The Pharaoh's daughter, unnamed in the Bible, ultimately becomes an enormous figure in Jewish and Egyptian history, not by her name, but by her deeds and by her faithfulness to one of God's chosen prophets.

Do you notice this powerful woman in Biblical history is not named? The Pharaoh's daughter, the most extraordinary and influential woman in Egyptian history, is veritably unknown, even though she is considered as one of the country's most prolific builders and successful traders.

Her most significant accomplishment, though, is raising a young Hebrew boy. At great risk to her life and inheritance, she provides this future prophet and writer of the Pentateuch with a most excellent Egyptian education.

And she is mentioned in a mere seven verses in the Bible.

According to Josephus in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, her father, the Egyptian pharaoh, has been warned that "there would be a child born to the Israelites, who, if he were reared, would bring the Egyptian dominion low, and would raise the Israelites; that he would excel all men in virtue, and obtain a glory that would be remembered through all ages." The Pharaoh is petrified that this prophecy would mean an end to his dynastic influence and so orders all Hebrew children under two to be executed. (Doesn't this sound eerily similar to King Herod born nearly 1,500 years later when he orders all male children, also under two, to be slaughtered?)

Hence, Jochabed, Moses' biological mother, makes the decision to relinquish her three month-old infant into Yahweh's protective presence in the flowing waters of the Nile rather than see him brutally slaughtered. Pharaoh's daughter happens to be at the river washing herself at the exact moment Jochabed places him in a tar-covered papyrus basket down the Nile River. Miriam, ever protective of her little brother, follows from the riverbank to see what happens. Coincidentally, Pharaoh's daughter

"saw the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to get it. She opened it and saw the baby. He was crying, and she felt sorry for him.

'This is one of the Hebrew babies,' she said.

Then his sister [Miriam] asked Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and get one of the Hebrew women to nurse the baby for you?'

'Yes, go,' she answered.

And the girl went and got the baby's mother [Jochabed].

Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you.'

So the woman took and the baby and nursed him. When the child grew older, she took him to Pharaoh's daughter and he became her son. She named him Moses, saying, 'I drew him out of the water.'" (Exodus 2:5-10, NKJV)

Is this pure chance, or part of God's grand orchestrated plan to save the Jewish nation? And how could this one woman be the answer to it all?

According to historical documents, who *is* the Pharaoh's daughter? Egypt's 18th dynasty begins with Thutmose I in approximately 1526 B.C. – the exact year Moses is born. Because she is the only surviving child of Thutmose I (her two brothers are dead), she is widely believed to be Hatshepsut.

During her formative years, Hatshepsut watches her father's Egyptian dynasty become weaker and weaker since his primary goal of conquering other nations thinly stretches the country's resources. As a result, Thutmose I relegates Egypt's crumbling infrastructure to the backburner. He stretches his country's military and financial resources, and the country becomes economically vulnerable to other nations. Egypt, despite these conditions, still maintains a reputation as a powerhouse in education, architecture, philosophy, and engineering.

Hatshepsut carefully watches as her father employs tyrannical, ruthless governing tactics over Egypt's growing minority. She sees her father diminish his stronghold of power while simultaneously wiping out vulnerable, defenseless, innocent Hebrew children. Thutmose's brutal strategies do not show his strength as ruler with politically savvy, but rather his fear and weakness as a man.

This fear rules his life as he is constantly looking over his shoulder to be overthrown. Equally important, his dynasty is also in peril since he has no surviving sons and only one daughter, Hatshepsut. According to Egyptian rule, she must have either a son or husband in order to be considered a legitimate heir and successor. She, unfortunately, has neither.

Hatshepsut has every political motive to acquire a son, and in light of these events, it makes total sense when she whisks away an orphaned infant boy abandoned on the river. Moses, as she calls him—the Egyptians call water by the name of *Mo*, and *Uses* because he was saved out of it—is a convenient answer to her dilemma as his basket suddenly appears before her during her ritual bathing. She has found the adopted heir who can protect her father's dynasty, the fate of Egypt, and also give her the legitimate right to rule.

It should concern her, though, that this is not just any child, but a *Hebrew* child. One who is a sworn enemy of the state. If caught, she could receive the death penalty. According to the scribes' foretelling, this baby could overthrow *her*

dynasty as well instead of saving it. The Pharaoh's daughter takes a tremendous risk on many fronts by bringing this infant home.

So why does Hatshepsut do it? Why doesn't she try to adopt an orphaned Egyptian boy instead? And why, when she brings him back to the palace, does the Pharaoh allow her to keep Moses? Why does he go against his own trusted counselors? Why does he ignore his irreversible edict to have him killed?

The Bible mentions Moses as being a fine child. Josephus further notes that Moses is an exceedingly beautiful boy, and his beauty was so remarkable that many people would stare at him. The Jewish Midrash suggests Moses has the shekinah—God's spirit presence—surrounding him, which is seen and felt by anyone who gazes on his countenance, including Hatshepsut.

The Pharaoh's daughter is also likely prompted by the whispering of God to rescue this special baby. Perhaps she also has tremendous compassion for this crying child, alluding to a gentle nature quite opposite to that of her father, and fully understands his impending execution if she does not save him.

Hatshepsut, entranced with baby Moses and desiring to save the Egyptian dynasty, takes a tremendous chance. One can imagine the fear in her heart as she prepares to introduce him to her father. Even though she is Thutmose's remaining child, she cannot rely upon this to remedy such a fragile situation. The Pharaoh's daughter demonstrates her remarkable courage and determination by confronting her authoritarian father, and explains why future generations designate her a "righteous Gentile" since she significantly assists God's people, even as a nonbeliever.

The sacred scribes and counselors react strongly, to say the least, when they see Hatshepsut bring this Hebrew boy into Pharaoh's presence. These men throw a holy fit – yelling, cajoling, imploring, and beckoning the Pharaoh to get rid of this baby at once. *This* is the baby they have been fiercely warning him about who would lead to the diminishment of Egyptian rule.

Yet the Pharaoh's daughter does not argue with them, as she could. She does not silently await her father's decision. She exhibits tremendous wisdom and strength of character by acknowledging God's presumed nudging, and places this beautiful baby boy into her father's arms. She intuitively knows her father still mourns his dead sons. She also guesses, correctly, that Moses' shekinah which already affects her would naturally impact her father as well. The Pharaoh melts, much to the chagrin of his advisors, and allows her to keep and raise this baby as her own. Knowing he is further cementing the heir of his dynasty doesn't hurt matters either.

Hatshepsut now has the wherewithal to acquire a Hebrew wet nurse and unwittingly hires Moses' natural mother instead of an Egyptian one, indicating that racial bigotry and religious discrimination mean little to her. The Pharaoh's daughter could have left Moses to starve to death instead of choosing a Hebrew woman to nurse him. Interestingly, the Bible relates that Moses would only nurse with his own mother, turning his head away from any other lactating woman—both Hebrew and Egyptian.

Now with her father's blessing, she raises Moses as if he were her own natural child. She provides him with the finest education Egypt has to offer in geography, history, music, law, mathematics, literature, philosophy, and writing. Incidentally, this writing instruction comes in very handy when he authors the Torah and incorporates Mosaic law into its pages many years later in the deserts of Mt. Sinai. It's as if God's providential hand designed these events to work in tandem. Luke similarly records in the book of Acts that

“Pharaoh's daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.” (Acts 7:21- 22, NKJV)

Hatshepsut grooms Moses as a future leader and beloved son, inadvertently giving him the leadership tools which would serve him well during the famous Jewish Exodus. But while she mentors him in all the Egyptian ways, remember she has his birth mother, Jochabed, nursing him in the palace for what is guessed to be anywhere from three to seven years. Not only is Moses instructed in both Egyptian and Hebrew traditions, but the Pharaoh's daughter is as well.

Hatshepsut loves this boy, and likely develops an appreciation for his mother and the Hebrew nation due to their repeated contact. She presumably learns not to hate them as her father does since she is gifted with knowing the beauty of their culture. She recognizes, too, that the pagan worship of the sun god Ra, or Isis, pales in comparison to the Hebrew's one true God.

Hatshepsut's highly successful twenty-two-year reign as Pharaoh begins around 1512 B.C., and her rule is considered to be the most successful empire Egypt ever has. She builds extensively in Thebes in a style unrivaled for over 1,000 years, and is noted for her grandiose ancient temple Deir el Bahri. Since she promotes peace rather than expanding the empire's boundaries like her father, she concentrates the country's resources into rebuilding. Thus, she is regarded as one of the world's most prolific builders ever.

She also increases the mining industry, re-establishes trade networks, builds a huge number of statues, and successfully funds a mission to the Land of Punt, which includes five enormous ships. These ships bring back thirty-one live myrrh trees, which later serve as one of the precious gifts presented to

baby Jesus, the King of Kings. Imagine that.

Unfortunately, when Moses flees Egypt after killing an Egyptian soldier, Pharaoh Hatshepsut could no longer claim him as her successor, thus forcing her to relinquish her reign to the next heir apparent—her stepson Thutmose III. After the Hebrew slaves' massive exodus twenty years after his ascension as Pharaoh, history records Thutmose obliterating all her statues, buildings, and her title. Though this behavior is typical of a successor who reigns out of revenge, spite, or insurrection, this is not the case since he is a legitimate heir.

Legend has it that before Moses leaves Egypt, Hatshepsut converts to Judaism. Her stepson's actions strongly suggest that her conversion is considered an unforgivable betrayal to their family name and to the Egyptian empire as a whole. He is left with no choice but to reverse any success she enjoyed simply because of her willingness to accept the one true God.

Still, Hatshepsut's accomplishments would not have been possible if not for her momentous, life-changing decision to adopt a little Hebrew orphan boy. Moses would not have become the educated, militaristic, powerful leader of the Hebrew nation and the Torah's scribe if not for her tutelage, love, and decision to risk everything for him. They were an integral part of each other's lives, and one could not have succeeded without the other. Each also enjoyed the providence of God's protection.

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Hatshepsut's death occurs in 1458 B.C. Upon archaeological excavations of her sarcophagus in the 20th tomb of the Valley of the Kings (a.k.a. KV20), she probably died of a combination of diabetes, bone cancer, and an infection from an abscessed tooth. Moses more than likely does not see her while he was in exile in the Midian desert. History does not record if she is present when Moses appeals to her stepson, Thutmose III, to free the slaves from Egypt. What an interesting scene that would have been, to say the least.

As Mother Rachel Midrash in her biblical commentary on the Torah states,

"Thus even in Egypt, the heart of darkness, light managed to penetrate. So it is sometimes in places where darkness seems invincible, the light of mercy can break through where you least expect it, even where evil is blackest."

Amen.



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(Please see the References page on website for notes and resources.)



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